

The American Veteran, Edition 7, Part 1

Host: Hello, I'm Jim Benson.

This is "The American Veteran," a public affairs program produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This is our seventh episode and we'll show you some of the things VA is doing to provide the benefits and services you have earned and to honor your service.

Our first story: We visit with a man in transition on a ship in transition. As the USS Carl Vinson arrived in its new home port, we talked with sailor Bruce Kavanaugh, a Chief Culinary Specialist on the ship.

Benson: Bruce has been cooking for the Navy for 22 years, but now that he is retiring from the military to his home in Bremerton, Washington, his life will present a whole new menu: The first difficult choice.

Kavanaugh: I guess it would be getting out finding a job and the comfort zone of having a job. And doing something for 22 years, like I have, I believe that going to be the toughest.

Benson: And to help him and other military personnel make that huge transition there are advisors like Maurice Thompson with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Maurice Thompson, VA Military Services Coordinator: Our main job is to provide assistance for people getting out of the military and that's through our Transition Assistance Program or our Disability Transition Assistance Program.

Benson: Maurice, a veteran himself spent 6 years with the Marines. He too, had the challenge of finding a job.

Thompson: Before I separated, I had no idea. The only thing I knew was doing, I was going back home. So I really didn't have an idea of what job I wanted.

Benson: Had Maurice gone through the Transition Assistance Program - or TAP - he might have had a plan. TAP counsels military men and women about VA benefits to ease the transition to civilian life. DTAP is for those with disabilities. Maurice first learned about veterans benefits when an unemployment office directed him to a Vet Center. Now he teaches tap classes for VA.

Thompson: We do suggest them to really get in to the TAP classes. Because that's where we will give them all the information, the paperwork they need.

Kavanaugh: I went through TAP class prior to deployment - lot of good information. I kept all the pamphlets and stuff. It makes your transition a whole lot easier.

Benson: Diane Fuller of VA says there's even more.

Fuller: We have our Compensation Program which is for service connected disabilities. We also have Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program. Of course, our normal education program is something most all veterans take advantage of.

Kavanaugh: I have been taking classes on the ship. I am pretty closed to my associate's degree, so I plan to try to get that, finish that up when I get back to Bremerton.

Benson: VA also helped Bruce buy his home.

Kavanaugh: I was little confused at first, but that's with anybody who buys a home. So as soon as the VA has the VA got in contact with my realtor everything went so good.

Benson: And for medical coverage.

Kavanaugh: I do have hearing loss. I also have lower back problems. I will use the disability compensation plan when I get out and I have already have all my records ready to take to the Veteran Administration.

Thompson: Now, those that are disabled veterans will come in for free treatment. Those other veterans are put into our different priority groups to determine if they will be charged for their health care.

Benson: Bruce's life is coming together like a well planned meal. But for those who find a few lumps in the gravy, VA is there to serve up solutions.

Fuller: Your benefits aren't here for just today, they are here for tomorrow as well.

Kavanaugh: I plan on using as many Veterans Administration benefits that I can. So that way it makes my transitions a lot easier.

Benson: To find out what benefits you are entitled to, call 1-800-827-1000 or visit our web site at www.va.gov.

Our next story takes a look at students from Washington Court House High School in Ohio and a special project they are working on to memorialize Civil War veterans. Nina Edwards has more.

Nina Edwards: At the Bloomingburg, Ohio, city cemetery, students from neighboring Washington Court House High School pour over 70-year-old maps of local grave sites. On each map, there's a special marker wherever a veteran is buried.

Alex Moore, Washington Court House High School graduate: I thought if you serve in the military or the Army or anything like that, I thought you'd be guaranteed a marker, basically forever.

Edwards: Instead, what Alex Moore and his classmates found was even though veterans' graves were marked on the map, often they had no headstone.

Moore: And then we just put the flag down, so that when we come back, we can put the marker in and this unknown veteran will be marked.

Edwards: So they decided to mark the graves themselves.

Edwards: In the four years since the class started, the students have replaced or set 70 headstones in two local cemeteries, creating a place of honor that was once bare.

Chad Carter, Washington Court House High School graduate: It's definitely nice to know that I'm helping preserve someone's memories, someone that had a life. They were loved and had an impact on either this community or the area.

Edwards: Most of the headstones the students set are for Civil War Veterans...

Paul LaRue, History Teacher: Our goal would be that, in every cemetery in every community, all soldiers have marked graves. They've given their last measure for the country and it seems like it's the least that we can do.

Edwards: While these students may never become historians, they say they now have a greater appreciation of history and the role their community played in it.

Casey McCown, Washington Court House High School graduate: I didn't know a lot about the Civil War until I started helping out with this, so it was interesting.

LaRue: We'll do it however long there is to mark unmarked graves, whether anybody knew we were here or not, just because it's the right thing to do and it's a great lesson for the students.

Edwards: A student lesson that will forever pay tribute to those whose service to America was once forgotten, but now their place in history is forever preserved.

Benson: If you would like to find the Civil War gravesite of a relative or a loved one, visit a free genealogy database at this web site: www.accessgenealogy.com

Or to find a gravesite at any VA national cemetery, go to:
www.gravelocator.cem.va.gov

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